

Timothy McGee, editor, with A. G. Rigg and David N. Klausner. *Singing Early Music: The Pronunciation of European Languages in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996. 320 pp.

Reviewed by Eric Rice

The principal title of this book underscores its kinship with Harold Copeman's *Singing in Latin* (1990), a pioneering work that has become an important resource for conductors and singers of Latin-texted music. Copeman painstakingly analyzes puns, spelling, and descriptions of phonology from various periods, offering suggestions for pronunciation in the performance of music along the way. While Copeman's book has been widely praised for its utility, it has also been criticized for "fall[ing] between two stools: it is neither a totally scholarly presentation of sources with an added commentary nor a practical handbook with guidelines to performers clearly set out" (Ledsham 1993). *Singing Early Music*, on the other hand, is designed primarily as a practical handbook for performers based on sound linguistic scholarship. It offers important advice to singers and choral conductors, and it is of interest to musicologists and literary scholars as well. Much of the information presented was not easily accessible to performers prior to the book's publication, and this information has been gathered and presented in a clear, concise, interesting, and, above all, convenient fashion. This is an eminently useful book, but it needs to be used with discretion.

Easy access to information has clearly been an important criterion for the organization of the book. It is divided into sections dealing with regions of Western Europe: Germany and the Low Countries, Britain, France, the Iberian Peninsula, and Italy. Each of these sections contains a set of chapters dealing with languages, including Latin, spoken in the various regions. After some general remarks, most chapters present a brief summary of evidence for the pronunciations proposed; short bibliographies are provided for the benefit of those whose curiosity is less easily satisfied. Diachronic sound charts are provided so that one can see the changes in sound in relation to orthography that occurred over time, and sample texts from musical works are printed with transcriptions in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). An introduction provides clear, concise overviews of phonetics and European languages, and a phonetic chart is provided at the end to help the reader interpret the symbols of

the IPA. Finally, a compact disc containing readings of nearly all the sample texts is provided so that the texts and their transcriptions can be associated with the sounds they represent. In short, the book is designed to convey a great deal of information about a complex subject as concisely as possible, and it is largely successful. As might be expected, however, the concision of the book does lead to some problems with its use.

Scholarly presses are imposing increasingly stringent length limits and editorial requirements on editors and authors, and *Singing Early Music* could well owe some of the impetus for its brevity to its publishers rather than to its contributors or editors. Reducing the phonology of an entire language to a chapter of around a dozen pages is fraught with problems; add to this the changes in pronunciation that can occur over five hundred years, coupled with the scholarly debate about the nature of those changes, and one begins to see the complexity of the contributors' task. Timothy McGee makes this abundantly clear in his preface, and he also explains the book's guiding principle with regard to disclosure of what is known and unknown:

In some cases [the contributors] have been able to make quite sophisticated distinctions with great confidence, while on other occasions the choice of one sound over another may be no more than an informed guess. To avoid burdening the reader with authors' frequent claims of uncertainty, they have been edited down to a minimum. We ask you to believe that in mixing together secure fact and unclear guesses we have not intended to mislead but to give assistance. When an unambiguous answer was not available we instructed our authors to give the best possible advice, believing that our principle audience—singers—would prefer the opinion of an authority to no opinion at all. (xii)

There are several points worth considering here. First of all, performers referring to this book will not necessarily read the preface, especially once they have recognized the user-friendly format of the work. Such a format invites users to seek only the information they need in the appropriate chapter or chapters, without recourse to the preface; thus the cautionary remarks made there do not suffice in disclosing that educated guesses will not be distinguished from established facts. This is unfortunate, since the above paragraph makes it clear that more specific acknowledgements of such details once existed elsewhere in the text, but were subsequently "edited down." What may have seemed burdensome to the editors when reading the book cover-to-cover (an unlikely task for the average user) is less so when one is reading, say, twelve pages on the pronunciation of Old French.

Secondly, the authors' tendency to omit statements of uncertainty (as prescribed by the editors) contributes to the generally authoritative tone of the book, and I fear that some users may find it too easy to take the word of the authors as gospel. It is possible to state an opinion as an expert and also express uncertainty about it, allowing readers to make their own informed decision. In spite of the cautionary statement quoted above, in the opening of the preface McGee asserts the book's authority, even espousing the possibility of "historically correct vocal performance":

The original desire to undertake this book grew from my interest in the performance of medieval and Renaissance music. It seemed to me that if we are to recreate the music of those early centuries as faithfully as possible to the intentions of the composers, our first concern should be to perform it with the sounds the composers expected to hear. And whereas a number of scholars and instrument makers have been involved in the reproduction of authentic musical instruments over the past century, far less attention has been given to singing the texts with the correct pronunciation. It was this thought that prompted me to propose this book to the language specialists who have written the individual chapters.

Correct pronunciation will not by itself guarantee a historically correct vocal performance any more than will the use of the correct instrument; numerous other matters must also be taken into account. (xi)

While I am not at all opposed to the recovery and application of performance techniques of the past (this being, in fact, an area of considerable interest to me), I believe that scholars and performers must be cautious about claims for their use. The debate on performance practice scholarship and the use of authoritative terms like "authentic" and "historically correct" in connection with performance has compelled many scholars and performers to reevaluate their terms, if not also their positions.¹ This is not the place to rehearse the ideas of the debate; it is enough to stress that there *is* a debate. The notion that one can recover a "correct" performance from the past has been questioned not only because of the nature and small number of relevant historical documents, but also (and more importantly) because of the impossibility of total objectivity.² The linguistic snapshots the book provides do not so much as hint at these questions, and perhaps they cannot; they can, however, allow for the possibility of them by admitting what is unknown, and not insisting on "correctness."

This is but one of two pitfalls of the concise chapters. The other, as Alison Wray has rightly pointed out in an earlier review of this book, is

that the lack of detail in each chapter can easily lead one to make false analogies, and exceptional words can be read as regular ones (Wray 1997: 134). In one or two cases it seems that the IPA transcriptions have suffered exactly this fate. For example, the dialogue “Que dis-tu?” by Pierre de Ronsard, which also survives in a musical setting by Lassus, is given as an example of a late sixteenth-century French text. Here are the first two lines and their transcription (85–86):

Que dis-tu, que fais-tu, pensive Tourterelle,
dessus cest arbre sec? —Las! passant je lamente.

kə di ty kə fɛ ty pāsivə tuʁtəʁɛlə
dəsy sɛt aʁbʁə sɛk la pasā ʒə lamātə

[What are you saying, what are you doing, pensive Tourterelle,
upon this brittle tree? —Alas! suffering, I grieve.]

In addressing the critical issue of final consonant pronunciation in French, Robert Taylor writes: “During Period Three [1450–1650], the general rule is that *all* final consonants are silent, except for rare cases when they were restored consciously for the sake of clarity or as a result of spelling” (71, emphasis Taylor’s). The above transcription would seem to conform to the letter of this rule: the word “Las,” an archaic truncated version of “hélas” (whose relationship to the English “alas” is apparent), appears without a final sounding *s*. Alas, “hélas” is a word in modern French that is often mispronounced by English speakers, who have few occasions to use it other than in reading poetry and often do not learn that it is pronounced with a final *s*. Taylor takes great pains to explain the timing of the disappearance of final consonants generally, barring the exceptions he mentions above; this word, an exception in modern French, warrants further explanation, particularly since it occurs so often in the repertory. (It appears again in the following example, a Baïf text, also without a sounded *s*.) Is it possible that this word simply survived as it was, never losing its final consonant? Or was it restored consciously for the sake of clarity, one of the exceptions Taylor gives? While for some the meaning of the word in the above couplet may be clear from the context, the presence of a sounded final *s* would clarify things. “La” could be mistakenly heard as “là,” meaning “there” (signifying Tourterelle’s position upon the “arbre sec”), rather than “alas.” One could also argue that the final *s* was maintained here for emphasis, another one of the exceptions Taylor cites. A related problem is the word “sec,” here transcribed with its final consonant sounded, but read without it on the compact disc. It is another example of

an exception to the rule Taylor gives. These sorts of words ought to have been discussed, particularly when they are common in the repertory.

Other possible misreadings become apparent when one considers the pronunciation of a given text with regard to its meaning. Here is the beginning of another example, this time from the *Roman de Fauvel*, and its transcription (80–81):

Se mes desirs fust a souhais,
mener devroie grant joie;

sə me dezɪʁ fyta su.ɛs
mənɛʁ dɔvʁwe.ə ɡʁɑ̃ ʒwɛ.ə

[If my desires were all I could wish,
it would bring [me] great joy;]

As is clear from the context of the sentence, the first word is not the reflexive pronoun that it would seem to symbolize in modern French (“se”) nor the demonstrative pronoun (“ceux”), but rather the conjunction (“si” in modern French). Since this is the case, it seems less likely that the *e* in “se” represents the sound of a mid-central unrounded *e* or “schwa” [ə] as indicated above, and more likely that it represents the sound of an upper-mid front unrounded *e* [e], which is quite a bit closer to the high front unrounded *i* [i] than the schwa.³ This idea is supported by the next example in the book, a Machaut text, in which the same word is spelled “si” around a half-century later (82). This word, spelled both ways, is ubiquitous in the fifteenth-century chanson repertory, and it is a shame that its pronunciation has not been adequately explained. Dedicated singers and choral conductors will aim to understand a text’s meaning so as to transmit it more effectively; with a bit of background in the language being performed, access to a clear translation can illuminate issues of pronunciation as well as musical articulation.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that a knowledge of modern French will assist greatly in the use of the chapter on Old French. This is undoubtedly true for the other chapters as well, though not all languages pose so many problems of pronunciation. Not only will familiarity with a language’s modern equivalent (if it has one) assist in interpreting the information in the chapter (and in noting the occasional ambiguity or error), it will also provide a bit of guidance at those times when the book’s format raises as many questions as it answers. It is always wise, when possible, to consult a native speaker of the appropriate modern language. Often, the reactions and instincts of a native speaker with a good ear can

assist in refining a performance. Given this possibility and the scope of the book's undertaking, it is somewhat surprising that so few European scholars were involved in the project.

The pronunciation of Latin raises another set of interesting problems. The basic premise of the chapters on Latin—that its pronunciation in a given region was affected by the local vernacular—will ring true to anyone who has had the experience of comparing performances of the same motet by an amateur German choir and, say, an amateur English one. The question becomes not so much how Latin pronunciation was affected, but to what degree. The evidence, and there is a significant amount of it, is mustered in Copeman's *Singing in Latin*. Some of the conclusions reached there and in *Singing Early Music* are far removed from what one might imagine. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, Latin was a language of commerce, administration, diplomacy, literature, and religion. It was no one's mother tongue, but it was very much a living language, and it can be difficult to imagine the degree of difference in pronunciation of Latin throughout Europe. The evidence, however, indicates that such regional differences in pronunciation were considerable.

The sixteenth century saw serious attempts to reform the pronunciation of Latin to what was believed to be that of Antiquity; Erasmus's 1528 treatise *De recta latini graecique sermonis pronuntiatione dialogus* (A Dialogue on the Right Way of Speaking Latin and Greek), is one of the most important sources for pronunciation in the period, and it is cited often regarding regional pronunciations in both *Singing Early Music* and *Singing in Latin*. As part of Erasmus's efforts to effect pronunciation reform, he sought to demonstrate just how different the various regional pronunciations were. Not only was he well traveled and extremely well educated, he seems also to have had a very good ear. But Erasmus was unsystematic in his presentation of regional pronunciations, and it is important to remember that because he was attempting to persuade his readers of the need for reform, he had every reason to exaggerate. His complaints center on the most aurally deficient and least educated Latin speakers of the period, and he mentions music and singers very little.

Another important source, one that Copeman cites as a guide to pronunciation in both *Singing Early Music* (259–60) and *Singing in Latin* (70–73), is Ornithoparcus's *Musice active Micrologus* (1517). Ornithoparcus (whose vernacular name was probably Vögelstätter) was a well-traveled musician, and his treatise includes some very telling remarks on regional pronunciation. Nearly a century later, John Dowland, who presumably became familiar with the treatise during his tenure at the Danish court, thought enough of it to publish an English translation in 1609. The treatise

tise ends with “Ten Precepts necessary for every Singer,” and it is in these precepts that descriptions of pronunciation are given. Precept six reads:

6. The changing of vowels is a sign of an unlearned Singer. Now, (though divers people doe diversly offend in this kinde) yet doth not the multitude of offenders take away the fault. Here I would have the *Francks* to take heede they pronounce not *u* for *o*, as they are wont, saying *nuster* for *noster*. The countrey Church-men are also to be censured for pronouncing, *Aremus* in stead of *Oremus*. In like sort, doe all the *Renenses* from *Spyre* to *Confluentia* change the vowel *i* into the diphthong *ei*, saying *Mareia* for *Maria*. (89–90 of treatise; printed in facsimile in Copeman 1990: 72–73)

The details on regional pronunciation offered here are interesting, but I would like to focus on the first two sentences. As with Erasmus, the pronunciations that are being transmitted to us are those of the “unlearned,” who should not be excused simply because they are many in number. In our attempts to recover the details of past performances, the question must be posed whether the composer’s intentions (which we can never know entirely, and which we may consciously choose to ignore in some cases) are aligned with them. If we possess a specific complaint about music performed poorly in a given historical moment, do we want to reproduce it simply for the sake of history?

In response to sources like the treatises by Erasmus and Ornithoparcus, the authors have prepared transcriptions of sample texts containing striking diphthongs. Consider the first two lines of the text of a motet by Robert Fayrfax and their transcription (59–60):

O Maria Deo grata
Mater Christi praesignata

o: ma'ræi·a 'de·o 'græ:ta
'mæ:ter 'kræisti: presɪŋ'næ:ta

[O Mary, pleasing to God,
preordained mother of Christ]

The diphthongs assigned to the letter *i* in “Maria” and “Christi” are the most striking feature of this passage. The vowel shift was well underway in English during Fayrfax’s lifetime (ca. 1464–1521), and while it seems plausible enough to me that some might have pronounced Latin this way in

speech, did this really extend to singers? In our own day, choral conductors of amateur ensembles spend a great deal of time trying to expunge unwanted diphthongs from their performances and to articulate necessary diphthongs cleanly (this is especially true in the United States, where the pure vowel is a very rare commodity). I cannot imagine that this was less true during Fayrfax's lifetime, particularly given the statement by Ornithoparcus quoted above (in which one of the diphthongs he cites as egregious, that of "Maria," matches that of the above transcription). In these transcriptions (and in the book generally), the issue of how to *sing* the pronunciation proposed is not addressed. To sing the diphthong of the second syllable of "Maria" in the above transcribed text, does one sing the first vowel long and the second vowel short (unlikely), or the first short and the second long (probably)? How long should the first vowel be if it is not the long vowel? If the transcription is followed to the letter, it raises technical questions for the singer.

Furthermore, there are reasons to dispute the idea that musicians in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance pronounced Latin as poorly as people described in Erasmus's treatise and similar writings. While Ornithoparcus's remarks indicate that regional differences in Latin pronunciation affected singers, the degree to which this was true must have varied widely. How would a musician like Josquin, who spent his youth in French-speaking lands and much of his career in Italy, have wanted the Latin of his motets pronounced? Would his singers and students have adopted his pronunciation as "the proper pronunciation"? This question applies to many singers and composers of the period, for though Josquin was an exceptional musician, his peregrinations were anything but exceptional. Copeman addresses these issues in a section of *Singing in Latin* called "The 'international' composers" (183–93), but they are entirely absent from the Latin chapters in *Singing Early Music*. Since Copeman contributed six of the seven Latin chapters, it seems likely that he was directed not to include information of this kind, which might have extended the Latin chapters far beyond the length of the others.

Similar questions arise when the location of a given composer or choir sits on a linguistic boundary. I recently prepared Columbia University's collegium musicum for a concert that included plainchant and sixteenth-century polyphony from a vespers service in the Collegiate Church (now the Cathedral) of Saint Mary in Aachen, Germany. Aachen lies at the junction of two borders: that dividing French-speaking Belgium and the Netherlands, and the border dividing the latter two countries from Germany. During the period in question, the surnames of singers employed in the choir of the Collegiate Church seemed to indicate that singers were of Belgian and Dutch origin and thus possibly French- and

Dutch-speaking, but the canons of the church were clearly German speakers (a number of the church's surviving documents from the period are in German). In the end, I deferred to the canons and settled on a modified German pronunciation for the texts of the service, but I acknowledge that I made the decision based on educated guesswork and a limited time frame in which to research the problem. A great deal of thought must go into these kinds of decisions, and artistic choice will (and should) play a large role.

The collaborators have prepared a helpful and informative book that is easy to use. With its help, many professional and amateur performers are realizing effective performances with previously unused vocal colors. The book has been cited in program notes for concerts by the New York-based ensembles Anonymous 4 and Lionheart, who reported that their recent performances together of Ockeghem's *Missa Mi-Mi* "just felt right" because they were using a pronunciation influenced by French, as suggested by the book.⁴ In my own conducting work I have found it very helpful.

However, there is much that the book does not do that it could have easily done. Rules are summarized, but exceptions are not noted. The editors and authors would have done well to differentiate between educated guesses and reasonably established facts, and they could have avoided the authoritative tone conveyed by notions of "historically correct" performance. It is a pity that very few European scholars were involved in the project, for they would have brought different perspectives and instincts about their own languages to the discussion. Involving a greater number of musicologists and performers in the discussion might also have shed additional light on problems specific to the repertoires of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.⁵ The book does not truly deal with the notion that trained singers, both in our own day and in earlier times, sing differently from the way that they speak. (The principal title, *Singing Early Music*, could serve to raise the expectation that vocal performance practices are treated in the book; while the rest of the title clarifies the book's contents, it is remarkable that a book called *Singing Early Music* does not actually discuss singing or music *per se*.) Finally, the book does not actively advise singers and conductors to consider the context in which the music was initially created, and its effect on pronunciation. This may seem an obvious point, but a performer with a deadline is likely to look for quick answers in a book like this, overlooking, for example, the somewhat complicated question of whether Josquin intended the Latin in his motets to be sung with an Italian or French pronunciation. In the end, it is always wise to consult experts and native speakers, each of whom will bring something different to the enterprise. Something as rich as the pronunciation of language cannot be summarized easily, and this fact needs to be borne in mind.

Notes

1. The literature documenting this debate is considerable, but two rich and well-known points of departure are Taruskin (1995) and Kenyon (1988).
2. On this point and for an excellent list of questions raised by the rise of the "historical performance" movement, see Kenyon (1988, esp. 12–14).
3. My thoughts on this are due in part to personal communication with Paul van Nevel, April 1999.
4. John Olund of Lionheart, personal communication, January 1999.
5. For an example of the kind of collaborative work that European linguists and musicologists have produced, see Rosenthal (1998). My thanks to Paul van Nevel for bringing this book to my attention.

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